DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 326 504 SP 032 737

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TITLE Self Hypnosis for Elite Athletes.
PUB DATE Jun 90
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the FIMS World Congress of Sports Medicine (Amsterdam, Netherlands, June, 1990).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adults; *Athletes; *Behavioral Objectives; *Brain Hemisphere Functions; Competition; Foreign Countries; *Hypnosis; Imagery; Performance Factors; *Self Actualization; Sport Psychology; *Success; Visualization
IDENTIFIERS Australia

ABSTRACT

A summary of the use of hypnosis in sport (Morgan 1980) has suggested that the evidence in this area is equivocal, particularly in strength, endurance, and psychomotor tasks. However, some experiments have demonstrated the potential use of hypnosis. This paper presents examples of two elite Australian athletes who achieve success using hypnosis or self-hypnosis. One, an outstanding shooter (moving targets) had injured his arm and lost confidence in his ability to regain his former standing in the sport. With the assistance of a sport psychologist and after instruction in self-hypnosis, this athlete practiced a self-hypnosis procedure and used it in competition, emerging with a gold medal. The other, a tennis player, overcame tension and anxiety with progressive relaxation and imagery, achieved through hypnosis. Within 12 months he won several tournaments and was chosen for Australia's Davis Cup team. While not all athletes will achieve success through hypnosis or self-hypnosis, nevertheless, it appears that those athletes who possess skills and fitness can use the procedure successfully to achieve their potential. (JD)

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FOR
ELITE ATHLETES

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SUMMARY OF PAPER PRESENTED AT FIMS WORLD CONGRESS OF SPORTS MEDICINE, AMSTERDAM, JUNE,1990

SP 032 737

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In recent years there has been an escalation in the number of various psychological methods used by sport psychologists and coaches, in order to enhance the prospects of their athletes reaching the potential of which they are capable. Such methods have included Visual Motor Behavioural Rehearsal (Suinn, 1980), Sports Psyching (Tutko, 1976), Sybervision (De Vore 1981), Attention Control Training (Nideffer, 1978), inner Mental Training (Unestahl, 1983) and many others. In varying degrees each of these methods uses some form of relaxation procedures and a form imagery or visualization. Perhaps each of these procedures could be more correctly called, "Self Hypnosis".

A summary of the use of hypnosis in sport by Morgan (1980) suggested that the evidence in this area was equivical, particularly in strength, endurance and psychomotor tasks, although some experiments have demonstrated the potential use of hypnosis in sport. It is the purpose of this paper to add to that evidence examples of Australian athletes who have achieved success using self hypnosis.

Unfortunately the debate over the use of hypnosis has gone on for many years, with perhaps the criticism of stage and screen hypnotists being directed at sports hypnosis. Whilst there may be many ethical problems to overcome, such as who is qualified to use hypnosis, never the less hypnosis is a natural state, such as in sleep and day dreaming, and can be used to speed up what are otherwise normal psychological processes.

In its simplest form hypnosis can be defined as being an altered state of consciousness in which the mind is susceptible to suggestion (Orne, 1980) although Unestahl (1983) suggests it is an alternate mode of consciousness, characterised by restricted attention and an increased preparedness to respond to suggestions and images.

On interviewing elite athletes Unestahl (1983) suggested that at critical stages of their performance they reach a state of mind called the "ideal performing state" which was similar to the alternative mode of consiousness, hypnosis. It is during this state that the athlete can narrow his attention and dissociate from other distractions. According to Unestahl and Hall (1982) it is at this stage that the brain switches from the left hemisphere which utilizes sensory body movements required in sport. Vivid mental, visual rehearsals that almost duplicate actual physical performance, tend to become a reality in the subconscious mind of the right hemisphere. Thus it is important for an athlete to learn to identify and induce the right state of consciousness to perform optimally at his sport.

In order for the athletes not to always have a hypnotist present, it is essential that they receive training in self hypnosis, which according to Unestahl (1983) becomes easy after some weeks training and can be done without outside guidance.

Once the athlete has managed to induce the state it is not difficult to develop the mental skills that are important for the athlete's particularevent. For example the athlete is asked to feel themselves performing their event to the best of their ability (perfection is possible) rather than just watch themselves performing. Once the athlete can realistically experience their performance in mental imagery, they can practice eliminating distracting cues, learning to concentrate on the right cues, and depending upon the sport, can see themselves coming back from either a poor performance, a mistake, or coming from behind to be successful.

As the athlete becomes secure and skilled at using self hypnosis they can then begin to use it immediately before their competition event and hence be completely relaxed from any anxiety. At this stage they would be ready to use exertion arousal, (Davey, 1973, 1986, 1989), to bring themselves to the optimal level in order to perform as near to perfection as their talent allows.

The following are examples of elite athletes in differing events, who have used the above procedures to achieve their goal of excellence in their particular sport.

John (a fictitious name) was an outstanding shooter (moving targets) who had injured his arm and subsequently lost confidence in his ability to regain his former standing in the sport. He found he

had a deviance between his practice scores and his scores in competition. With the possibility of being selected in the Australian shooting team for the Commonwealth Games in Auckland, John was highly motivated and sought the assistance of a sport psychgologist.

He was tested on the Stanford Hypnotic Susceptibility Scale (Weitzenhofer and Hilgard, 1967) and shown to be in the high susceptibility category and readily agreed to participate.

Under hypnosis it was suggested to John that he had the skills and fitness to regain his former ability, and he was taken through numerous shooting competitions always emerging as the victor.

One particular scenario that John was assisted with was that in the event of a dead heat he was taken through a final shoot out, as this had happened many times previously. Having been instructed in the use of self hypnosis, John was advised to practice this particular procedure many times especially between the three days of the competition.

At the Commonwealth Games in Aukland 1990 John was leading after the first day and finished equal first at the completion of the tournament. This resulted in a shoot out and John emerged with a gold medal.

When asked how he felt before the final shoot out John replied,

"I was very confident that I could beat him as I had been through it in my mind many times before."

Peter (again a fictitious name) was an outstanding junior tennis player, but according to his coach became anxious and tense now that he had reached senior level, and was a long way from fulfilling his potential. According to his coach he had the skills and fitness to be the equal of the best tennis players Australia has produced.

As before both progressive relaxation and imagery were given with some months practice before beginning with hypnosis followed by self hypnosis. Under hypnosis Peter was asked to imagine himself in various situations such as coming back from behind when he lost the first set, and seeing himself win a close tie breaker. In each case he was asked to specifically imagine himself playing and beating particular opponents.

Within twelve months Peter had won three satellite tournaments in Australia, including breaking Australia's number one player, and reaching the doubles final of one of the Grand Slam tournaments. Subsequently, he has been chosen in Australia's Davis Cup team and presently has an undefeated record.

As has been previously stated (Davey 1989) such procedures have been successful with squash players, golfers, gymnasts and

footballers, males and females, as well as individual and team sports. It is unrealistic to suggest that hypnosis or self hypnosis will be as successful with all athletes as it was with those described here, nevertheless it appears that in many elite athletes it can overcome anxiety and restore confidence in those athletes who possess the skills and fitness, and yet are not achieving their potential.

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